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AESTHETIC AUTHENTICITY IN CINEMA

**EDITED BY
FILIPE MARTINS**

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THE CONSTRUCTION OF CHANCE IN CINEMA: CONTINGENCY FIGURES

FILIFE MARTINS

Disfiguration

What type of realism is intended by the artistic expression? What kind of real do we refer to when reasoning about aesthetic truth or authenticity? In what sense does one speak of authenticity by claiming that art stands against narrative, figurative naturalism or representation? According to J. Epstein, “cinema is truth, a story is a lie” (1983, p. 276); Heidegger considered that “truth happens in the Van Gogh’s painting” (1992, p. 44); and G. Deleuze and F. Guattari declared that “no art, no sensation, was ever representational” (1992, p. 170). If the real is the beacon for aesthetic authenticity, inspiring art realisms – and, especially, as we will see, the drive to conceal authorial marks – then the question arises about what this movement implies.

More than faithfulness to the real as in classical realism or mimetic verism, modern art began to measure the terms of aesthetic authenticity in the struggle that the artist undertakes against himself, against his subjective prejudices. It is a contest against subjectivity. After overcoming the ambition of accessing the real through classic naturalist methods, modernity began to rescue the real, to a large extent, through the deconstruction of the artist’s clichés and vices. In Deleuze’s words: “There are psychic clichés, just as there are physical clichés, ready-made perceptions, memories, ghosts. In all of this there is a very important experience for the painter: before

the work begins, the frame is already occupied by a whole category of things that we can call ‘clichés’. It’s dramatic. (...) On the frame there are always clichés that are already there” (Deleuze, 2011, p. 152). It will thus be necessary to contradict such prejudices in order to access the “figural”, the pure presence, which Deleuze associates with the “true”. The artist (in this case the painter) must go through the catastrophe, through the chaos: “How can I make what I paint not be a cliché? It will be necessary to quickly make certain ‘free marks’ inside the painted image, to destroy the nascent figuration in it and to give an opportunity to the Figure, which is the improbable itself” (*Ibid.*, p. 161). This process, described by Deleuze as “deformation” or “disfiguration”, aims to erase all evidence of regulation or subjective intention (the figuration), so that a new figuration (the Figure) can emerge from it – the true, non-representational image. The first figuration is false, the second is authentic. As Deleuze explains, the “two figurations, the figuration preserved despite everything and the figuration rediscovered, the falsely faithful and the true, do not have the same nature” (*Ibid.*, p. 167). It is the latter figuration, the one which is extracted by crossing the sieve of chaos, that can rescue a value of truth. Where does this truth come from? Perhaps from an “other world”. Here is how Deleuze describes the process of passing through the catastrophe: “It is as if the hand gained independence and started to be at the service of other forces, tracing marks that no longer depend on our will and our gaze. These hand marks, almost blind, thus bear witness to the intrusion of another world into the visual world of figuration” (*Ibid.*, p. 171). In short, no longer the artist’s world, but the “true” world, the “sensation” disconnected from the subject, the perception transferred to the interior of things themselves, the immanence plane. In this perspective, it is the human brain that subtracts authenticity from the world, submitting it to the sensorimotor needs of the organism; and it will then be up to the artist to restore that authenticity. Jacques Rancière describes this position as follows:

If things need to be given a perceptive power that they already ‘had’, it is because they have lost it. And if they lost it, it was for a very precise reason: it was because the phosphorescence of the images of the world and their movements in all directions

were interrupted by this opaque image called the human brain (...). The voluntary work of art gives back to the events of sensitive matter the potentialities that the human brain took from them to constitute a sensorimotor universe adapted to its needs and submissive to its will. [It will then be up to art] to restore perception within things, to constitute an 'order' of art that returns the world to its essential disorder. (Rancière, 2014, pp. 182-183)

Simplicity

There are several poetic strategies aimed towards the restitution of an integral presence through the erasure of subjectivity or signifier traces. For example, the formal simplicity of minimalist art: just like the "disfiguration" described by Deleuze, this simplicity also aims to neutralize the representation, the illusionism, the message, the relational game between the parts of the composition, so that only remains the specific, literal object itself. The (paradoxical) claim to reduce art to the literal sense seems to have reached its most direct expression in the plasticist minimalism of the 1960s. Donald Judd, one of the main representatives of this artistic movement, adopted the term "literal space" to refer to the conceptual purpose of his works, opposing it to what he called "spatial illusionism". And the American critic Michael Fried used the term "literalist art" to refer (albeit pejoratively) to the minimal works of Donald Judd, Robert Morris, Tony Smith, among others (Fried, 1998). These works were often referred to as "specific objects", objects "without signification games, that is, without mistakes" (Didi-Huberman, 2011, p. 37). The effort to empty the content was, in fact, radical in these authors. Judd even accused the illusion of three-dimensionality in the paintings of Rothko, Pollock, Noland, Newman or Reinhardt. In Didi-Huberman's description: "It was enough for two colors to be presented for one to 'advance' and the other to 'retreat', immediately unleashing the whole game of unbearable spatial illusionism (...). Judd thus radicalized the demand for specificity – or 'literal space', as he called it – to the point of seeing in Rothko's paintings an 'almost traditional' spatial

illusionism” (*Ibid.*, pp. 31-32). To prevent this illusionism, it was necessary to eliminate all the details, so that the work would become a homogeneous, non-relational totality, that is, without relational games between the parts and without compositional traits. In Judd’s words: “Anything that is not absolutely plain begins to have parts in some way. The thing is to be able to work and do different things and yet not break up the wholeness that a piece has” (Judd interviewed by Glaser, 1995). The refusal of illusionism and the elimination of relational parts also aimed, in their own way, to extract or reveal the *presence* through “objects with excessively simple shapes, generally symmetrical, objects reduced to the ‘minimal’ form of an instantaneous and perfectly recognizable *Gestalt*. Objects reduced to the mere formality of their form” (Didi-Huberman, 2011, p. 34). In the same way that the disfiguration causes chance and disorder, minimalism rejects illusion and relationship. In both cases, it is a matter of rejecting the semiotic games associated with representation, figuration and narrative. In short, it is a matter of presenting without representing. As Frank Stella stated: “All I want anyone to get out of my paintings, and all I ever get out of them, is the fact that you can see the whole idea without any confusion... What you see is what you see” (Stella interviewed by Glaser, 1995).

Passivity

The formal simplicity of minimalist works fits into a broader strategy that modern cinema has also adopted: passivity. Unlike disfiguration, which accesses presence through excessive, chaotic or hysterical action by the artist who is committed to deconstructing all the envelopes (or “clichés”), passivity, in turn, is based on inaction, on preserving the real, which is intended to stay virgin, untouched, without traces of manipulation. In narrative arts such as cinema, this tendency marked a new way of relating to chance: “Suddenly – it is a case to say – we saw appearing (...) works that decisively broke with the traditional structures of the plot to show us a series of events without the conventional dramatic connections, a story in which nothing happens, or things happen that no longer have

the appearance of a narrated event, but of an event that happened by chance” (Eco, 1989, p. 215). Passivity assumes a major role in capturing this chance or contingency, expressing the recognition of an innate richness of the real, which must be respected. The images that art presents tend to show an adirectional landscape, an essential indifference or ambiguity. And passivity aims precisely at preserving this indifference, allowing the real to naturally come into the work instead of the artist whimsically selecting the elements of the real. The passivity assumed, in short, as a method – for example in the following description by Tacita Dean: “I shoot incredibly long takes and I just wait. It’s extremely expensive, but I hope something happens within the frame because I don’t like zooming or panning; I hope the bird flies across the frame” (Dean, 2012, p. 41).

Pure presence – embodied in the “figural” (Lyotard), or in the expression of “universal variation” (Deleuze) – may, in these terms, be accessible by two opposite ways: “one is complete immobility and the other the maximum possible mobility. In both cases, everything happens as if the filmmaker was trying to reach a reality prior to men” (Parente, 2005, p. 273). In the aesthetic purpose of art, these two opposing movements end up meeting. Rancière speaks of an identity of opposites: “identity of the active and the passive, of thought and non-thought, of the intentional and the unintentional (...). But what must this sovereign style produce? A work freed from any mark of the writer’s intervention, which possesses the indifference, the absolute passivity of things without will or signification” (Rancière, 2014, p. 193). This indiscernibility is characteristic of modern cinema, which Rancière fits into an “aesthetic regime of art”, as opposed to a “representational regime”. It is in the aesthetic regime that activity and passivity are radicalized to meet in presence. The extreme of activity is chaos, the extreme of passivity is indifference. In the words of Rancière: “This logic [of the aesthetic regime of art] opposes to the representative model of chained actions and expressive codes, suitable to themes and events, it is an original power of art, initially divided between two extremes: between the pure activity of a creation henceforth without rules or models and the pure passivity of an expressive power inscribed in the things themselves, independently

of any work or desire for signification" (*Ibid.*, p. 19). This original power of art, which supposedly grants access to pure presence, has a double valence whose poles are blurred: activity becomes indistinguishable from passivity.

At times, it will seem that this indiscernibility takes place under the auspices of passivity, to the detriment of activity: "In the representational regime, the work of art is thought of in the model of the active form that imposes itself on inert matter in order to submit it to the purposes of representation. In the aesthetic regime, this idea of a voluntary imposition of form over matter is rejected" (*Ibid.*, p. 193). But, in order for this distinction between activity and passivity to be brought to coincide with the distinction between the representational regime and the aesthetic regime, activity must be read in a stricter sense that no longer contemplates the (active) work of disfiguration. Disfiguration works against representation, it is an activity directed against itself, an autophagic movement that, by deliberately diving into chaos, ends up being confused with passivity. In fact, it seems to be a blind movement that, although performed by the artist, no longer depends on his will (and, in that sense, constitutes a false activity).

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Poetic effort and contingency

Contingency can come from two different sources: while disfiguration incites the contingencies of the work from within, passivity allows such elements to cut across the work from the outside. As Noel Burch describes: "There are those who make it so that a world of contingencies reacts on the work during its execution, entirely independent of the will of the composer or the performers, whose relations with the work will therefore be fortuitous: it is John Cage, for example" (Burch, 1973, p. 128). But there are also those who prefer "to see the breath of 'chance' pass over their works (the breath of an external contingency)" (*Ibid.*). In both cases, it is about contingency: an essential passivity, a withdrawal by the artist, even in the active work of disfiguration.

On the other hand, poetic activity is not reserved to the representational regime. Ultimately, we must accept that passivity

is illusory because it is a poetic strategy as any other within art. If passivity were absolute, there would be no art nor artist's purpose. The work cannot offer direct access to the real – a literal sense – because it always implies the performative arc of *returning* to the real. A poetic activity is required, however discreet it may be.

In any case, the question of whether the contingency was incited (via disfiguration) or merely encountered (via passivity) becomes secondary. The aesthetic experience does not require an explanation concerning the origin of the authenticity effect; there is no need to clarify whether the effect is due to the real itself or due to the poetic work of reconstructing the real. On the contrary, the work will seek to hide this origin, will seek to preserve the “doubt” about the mode by which it invoked contingency. It is this ambiguity that feeds the “identity of opposites” referred by Rancière.

But, within this indiscernibility of opposites, and despite it, it is still the disfiguration that prevails over passivity, even if, strictly speaking, it constitutes a false activity. According to Rancière:

This unity of opposites, which leads to coincidence between the artistic idea of the work and the potency of the origin, is only achieved, in fact, in the lengthy work of dis-figuration (...). It is this work that undoes the compositions of fiction or of the representational picture, revealing the gesture of painting and the adventure of matter under the themes of figuration. Behind conflicts of dramatic or romantic will, it makes the flash of epiphany shine, the pure splendor of the being without reason. (...) The art of the aesthetic era intends to identify its unconditioned power with its opposite: the passivity of the being without reason, the dust of elementary particles, the originary emergence of things. (Rancière, 2014, pp. 19–20)

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On the one hand, it is assumed that the work always presupposes a poetic effort. What we receive from cinematographic art is never the real itself (which is precisely why the realistic impression of cinema can become so admirable and unsettling). On the other hand, since it is not real, the filmic content is constantly threatened by the artificialness of representation. So that this work does not destroy the realistic

effect, representation is fought through the admission of chance, either through disfiguration, the passing through chaos, or through passivity, the artist's own inaction. And perhaps these strategies will be more effective the more they converge with each other.

In this context, cinema enjoys a privileged condition due to the intrinsically realistic characteristics of the device: "Cinema is, due to its material device, the literal incarnation of this unity of opposites, the union of the passive and automatic eye of the camera with the conscious eye of the filmmaker" (*Ibid.*, p. 194). But cinematographic art also must continually manage the balance between the filmmaker's activity and the device's realist automatism. The (apparently) active work of disfiguration cannot lose itself in arbitrariness, nor should the work of poetic structuring become too evident or imposing. And passivity, understood as an (apparent) absence of poetic work, cannot become orphan or idle either. The poetic work that focuses on aesthetic authenticity (that is, on the contingency, the effect of presence, the return to the real) implies an enduring game between passivity and activity, between safeguarding the real (where we also end up including the effort to disfigure the clichés) and the assertion of an authorial intention. In the artistic context, contingency is not to be mistaken with pure arbitrariness, which signals a structural deficit in the work, neither does it depend on a radical rejection of poetic structuring. The contingency results from a delicate balance between activity and passivity, without which the work will tend towards *arbitrariness*¹ (excessive passivity) or towards *artificialness* (excessive visibility of poetic activity). In both excesses, the aesthetic effect is lost, and the work runs the risk of failure.

The myth of total cinema and the rediscovery of chance

Cinema took up the old challenge of seeking authenticity through the reproduction of the real. André Bazin described this anthropological impulse as the *myth of total cinema*: "The guiding myth, then, inspiring the invention of cinema, is the accomplishment of

¹ See Martins, F. (2020).

that which dominated in a more or less vague fashion all the techniques of the mechanical reproduction of reality in the nineteenth century, from photography to the phonograph, namely an integral realism, a recreation of the world in its own image, an image unburdened by the freedom of interpretation of the artist” (Bazin, 2009, pp. 165-166). This appeal of the real is old and, evidently, did not come to a closure with the invention of cinema, continuing to shape its successive technical and poetic refinements. Ultimately, according to Bazin, cinema – as total cinema – is unachievable and utopian, even if the myth continues to drive cinematographic practice and inspire its improvement:

If the origins of an art reveal something of its nature, then one may legitimately consider the silent and the sound film as stages of a technical development that little by little made a reality out of the original ‘myth’. It is understandable from this point of view that it would be absurd to take the silent film as a state of primal perfection which has gradually been forsaken by the realism of sound and color. The primacy of the image is both historically and technically accidental. The nostalgia that some still feel for the silent screen does not go far enough back into the childhood of the seventh art. The real primitives of the cinema, existing only in the imaginations of a few men of the nineteenth century, are in complete imitation of nature. Every new development added to the cinema must, paradoxically, take it nearer and nearer to its origins. In short, cinema has not yet been invented! (*Ibid.*, p. 166)

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On the other hand, this drive towards the real, as expressed in the myth of a total cinema, seems to irremediably collide with the very attempt to reproduce or capture it. If the virginity of the real implies the chance and unpredictability of a world prior to the artists’ organizational work, then the realistic utopia is lost from the start and the “total cinema” can never really be invented. In this sense, one can even conclude, against Bazin, that it was in its beginnings that cinema came closest to realizing the myth of a

total cinema. In the words of Noël Burch: “It was in the beginnings of cinema that chance was most relevant: Lumière installs his camera on the quay at *La Ciotat* station and waits for the train to arrive. The handle turns when it appears, but it is always chance that drives the entirety of the ‘staging’: the action of the film consists, essentially, of unpredictable movements and gestures” (Burch, 1973, p. 131). The original purpose of the cinematograph technical demonstration was pure impression, still without narrative or poetic intensions, and even the visual theme was secondary, merely illustrative of the potential of the technical device. A pure sample of the real. The real is more in the pro-filmic than in the filmic. However, even in this original step, in this direct transfer of light patterns to film, cinema could no longer be total. The simple decision about the framing or placement of the camera was all it took to betray the real. Burch adds: “But it is also in this film, one of the first to be made, that Lumière inaugurates the fight against chance that would characterize almost all cinema for the next sixty years. (...) This is the case of *L’Arroseur Arrosé* and films of this style, a huge step forward in rejecting chance” (*Ibid.*, p. 131).

In the context of the arts, this domestication of chance, which is implied in the very notion of *poiesis* (however chaotic the artist’s intention may be), is condemned to follow a double and, in a way, paradoxical path: on the one hand, the real is domesticated through the effort of poetic organization that contradicts chance; on the other hand, the poetic effort itself is disguised so that manipulation is not unmasked. During the first decades of cinema, maintaining the balance between these two trends led to the refinement of a mimetic realism based on illusionism and the invisibility of the author and his techniques – a *zero-degree of cinematographic writing*. In Burch words:

Little by little, the studio became the refuge of an art that wanted to escape a world of chance, providing the means for an ever more perfect control, based on increasingly refined techniques. (...) Incidentally, it is interesting to note that this conquest, or rather, this neutralization of chance, was parallel to the progressive domination of the notion of the zero-degree

of cinematographic writing – which aimed, first of all, to make the technique invisible, but also to eliminate all the ‘failures’ due to the infiltrations of chance. (*Ibid.*, p. 132)

Burch considers that it was the overcoming of this “zero-degree” that marked the paradigm shift to the so-called modern cinema, especially since the post-war period: “It is not without reason that the rediscovery of chance and the refusal of this zero-degree intervened almost simultaneously in the history of cinema” (*Ibid.*, p. 132).

But it is not clear that Italian neorealism and other emerging cinematographic approaches have not pursued, by other means, the same dialectical articulation between the authorial drive and the preservation of an aesthetic authenticity. The zero-degree of cinematographic writing is not fixed, it evolves along with cinema itself and establishes, in each cultural moment, renewed demands on the terms of aesthetic authenticity.

The invisibility of narration: from classical realism to neorealism

In the first decades of cinema and, specially, in classic Hollywood cinema, the dominant model for authenticity manifested itself fundamentally through principles of narrative transparency, that is, through the concealment of the cinematographic apparatus, in order to optimize the visibility of the story or the diegetic world. “Transparency” corresponded to the invisibility of the cinematographic medium itself, in order to maximize the audience immersiveness. Invisibility that simultaneously implied the concealment of the production effort (absence of authorial marks), the narrator (reduced to an “ideal invisible observer”), or the *mise en scène* (believable and realistic, despite the use of manufactured sceneries). Of course, this effect of transparency was very artificial: “The aesthetic-ideological norm of classic Hollywood cinema was for a long time reduced to the ideal of ‘transparency’ (...). This norm actually implied quite complex significant work, aiming, among other things, at a kind of self-effacement, self-dissimulation” (Aumont, 2006, p. 54). But we must ask ourselves if this dissimulating work does not equally apply to neorealism or other expressions (not necessarily “realistic”) of

modern cinema. We can, for example, admit that classical realism and neorealism share the same principle of separation between the domain of narrated events and the domain of narration; and both cinematographic paradigms sought to hide the narration, albeit in different ways. Despite its naive illusionism, classical cinema also invokes a rigid separation between the world of the narrator (and the implied author) and a certain objective exteriority that is intended to remain immaculate. In the words of David Bordwell: "Classical narration makes the world of the fable [story] an internally consistent construct upon which the narrative seems to intervene from the outside. The manipulation of the *mise-en-scène* (people's behavior, lighting, sets, costumes) creates an apparently independent pro-filmic event that becomes the tangible world of the story, framed, and recorded from the outside" (Bordwell, 2005, p. 288). This detachment of the story from the narration corresponds to the invisibility of the narrator, who does not interfere with the *mise-en-scène*, observing it from a distance. The *mise-en-scène* itself becomes autonomous thanks to the invisibility of the production apparatus. The fable does not seem to have been constructed, but to pre-exist its narrative representation. These classical purposes are also, according to Bordwell, those of neorealism. Only the methods have changed, such as the neorealists' preference for wide shots with depth of field and without cuts. Bazin sought to justify the neorealist premise through an ontology of the cinematographic device that could dictate the recipe for authenticity, but this premise is shared with classical cinema, or even with cinema in general.

It is at another level, transcendent to cinema, that the ontological question must be asked: aesthetic authenticity, which mobilizes all art, as well as the stylistic trends and manifestos within the specific arts, has its own founding ontology. Thus, in the case of neorealism, one can say that the goal remained essentially the same, only changing the realist approaches, which began to consider new aspects of the psychology of perception, such as those that motivated the rejection of montage. Quoting Bordwell:

Bazin grants that classical editing mimics human acts of attention; he simply adds that those acts normally operate

in an *a priori* field of choice. Since an event exists within a continuum, a director who cuts denies us the perceptual options that a real observer on the scene would possess. The long take and staging in depth give the spectator the ability to create a mental decoupage as if he were actually on the scene. Whatever technique came to be privileged by any theorist or critic, the anthropomorphic premise of the invisible-observer account went unchallenged. (Bordwell, 1985, p. 10)

It is not the techniques or methods that define a greater or lesser ability to access the real, regardless of the historical moment. Indeed, the main stylistic characteristics of neorealism were reappropriated countless times for cinematographic purposes that hardly fit into realism (for example, in the work of Roy Andersson, the use of long shots and infinite depth of field, despite the clearly formalist tone of his films).

Behind the methods that distinguish the most varied cinematographic developments, we will always find the same premise of complicity with contingency. It is the very search for authenticity that is implicit in every aesthetic drive, regardless of the methods. The movement is more noticeable in realistic styles and manifestos, but it is always present wherever there is an aesthetic purpose, even when the work does not formally fit into realism or takes refuge in an inner realism (the honesty of a subjective voice, for example). It is not the concrete techniques and styles that are intrinsically realistic, but the premise of a fundamental complicity between art and the real.

This complicity is continually renewed: the relationship between art and contingency is not static, and the evolution of this relationship is imprinted in the paradigm shifts throughout the history of art. Since Plato, artificialness has been fought; and the opposite effect – the contingency of the real – assumes, in artistic expression, renewed garments that accompanied the times and techniques: naturalisms, immanentisms, neorealisms, etc.

Ambiguity and anti-narrative

When Bordwell describes “art cinema” based on two apparently contradictory qualities – realism and authorship –, he tries to reconcile them through the notion of *ambiguity*. In his words: “Realism and authorial expressivity, then, will be the means whereby the art film unifies itself. Yet these means now seem contradictory. Verisimilitude, objective or subjective, is inconsistent with an intrusive author (...). In short, a realist aesthetic and an expressionist aesthetic are hard to merge. The art cinema seeks to solve the problem in a sophisticated way: by the device of ambiguity” (Bordwell, 2008, pp. 155-156). This ambiguity ends up bringing the authorial aspects back to the realm of realism, providing them a certain plasticity; not only to the extent that “the author becomes a formal component” of the work (*Ibid.*, p. 154), but above all to the extent that authorship itself is expressed as a contingency of the spirit, a gesture of freedom, which is always ambiguous. Ambiguity therefore admits a complicity between realism and authorial expressiveness. And both characteristics of “art cinema” seem to equally partake in the anti-narrative tendency of cinematographic modernity: the refusal of narrative and representation can arise both from the passivity of the filmmaker who seeks to respect the virginity of the real and from his expressive freedom that shuffles the norms of reconstruction of that same real.

In fact, cinematographic modernity marked a new relationship with chance, proposing to deconstruct the classic narrative structures. This does not mean that cinema only then woke up to an aesthetic awareness; but it was mainly from the 1940s onwards that the aesthetic vocation of cinema became more apparent. The cinematographic avant-garde then began to invest in the rejection of narratives – which were associated with the suspension of realism and, therefore, barred from an aesthetic authenticity whose procedural arc depends on a *return to the real*. Quoting Burch:

The notion of indeterminacy is very fashionable in art today. (...) Beyond the ‘vanguardisms’, these experiences reveal a confused and yet generalized impatience before a solidly constituted tradition, that of the ‘closed’ work, to which the

‘open’ work is opposed. What do terms such as ‘indetermination’ and ‘open work’ mean, however, in the field of cinema? (...) They mean, among other things, the sudden irruption, in a totally artificial world, of a universe of more or less ‘natural’ contingencies. (Burch, 1973, p. 127)

The reconciliation with chance inaugurated new ways of accessing the real or the cinematographic effect of contingency. The openness, which previously belonged to the real, came to belong also to the work of art. As Bordwell notes: “Life is more complex than art can ever be, and the only way to respect this complexity is to leave causes dangling, questions unanswered. With the open and arbitrary ending, the art film reasserts that ambiguity is the dominant principle of intelligibility (...), that life lacks the neatness of art and this art knows it” (Bordwell, 2008, p. 156). Naturally, this tendency could not fail to undermine the classic narrative principles based on “closure”. According to Chatman: “such texts may be called ‘antinarratives’, since what they call into question is, precisely, narrative logic, that one thing leads to one and only one other, the second to a third and so on to the finale” (Chatman, 1978, p. 57). And he adds: “If the classical narrative is a network (or ‘enchainment’) of kernels affording avenues of choice only one of which is possible, the *anti-story* may be defined as an attack on this convention which treats all choices as equally valid” (*Ibid.*, p. 56). Gradually, the classic conception of narrative seems to have become one of the great victims of cinematographic modernity, reinforcing the incompatibility between the real (associated with contingency) and narrativity.

Metz dubbed this anti-narrative tendency the “great libertarian myth” (Metz, 1972, p. 175). Opposing the announced end of narrative and doubting the principle of refusal of narrative and representation in the context of cinema, Metz described the paradigm shift as follows: “A great and permanent misunderstanding hovers over the definition of ‘modern’ cinema. It is understood and sometimes affirmed that the ‘young cinema’, the ‘new cinema’, would have surpassed the narration stage, that the modern film would be an absolute object, a work that could be traversed in any direction, that would have in a way expelled the narrativity that guides classic cinema. This is the

great theme of the ‘disruption of narration’” (*Ibid.*, p. 173). There are several stylistic forms that Metz associates with this anti-narrative drive: “dedramatization” (defined as “a kind of ‘Antonioni tendency’” (*Ibid.*, p. 174), “improvised cinema” (taken to the limit in “*cinéma vérité*, in direct cinema and the like” (*Ibid.*)), the “cinema of filmmakers”, the “cinema of the shot”, the “cinema of freedom”, the “language-cinema” (as opposed to “spectacle-cinema”), etc. In any case, although Metz relativizes the anti-narrative interpretation of such cinematographic tendencies, he admits, at the same time, that modern cinema has introduced a broad new level of authenticity: “It is still true – and this is immediately noticeable in certain films – that the best works of the new cinema, including some direct-cinema films, often provide the spectator with a kind of truth that was rarely found in the great works of the past, a truth infinitely difficult to define, but that we feel instinctively. Truth of an attitude, of an inflection of voice, of a gesture, naturalness of the tone...” (*Ibid.*, p. 185).

The contingency of the real within the narrative

What Metz and other cinema scholars tried to demonstrate was the possibility of reconciling this authenticity with the narrative fabric itself, henceforth permeable to the contingency of the real; that is, to demonstrate that the aesthetic experience is not necessarily incompatible with the narrative sense. From a narratological point of view, this conciliation involved introducing the concept of contingency in the field of narrativity, so that it could accommodate the most subversive logics of modern artistic expression. Jean Pouillon used the term to account for the most extreme cases in literature (Pouillon, 1946, pp. 26–27); and Seymour Chatman, referring to Pouillon’s thesis, admits that: “the idea of contingency is attractively broad, for it can accommodate new organizing principles” (Chatman, 1978, p. 47). Adopting the concept of “contingency” to refer to the loosening of causality (which is, as we know, a fundamental pillar of narrative structuring), Chatman asks himself: “Is the relation between sequence and causality one of necessity or of probability? Can there be mere sequence, a

depiction of events that simply succeed one another but in no sense owe their existence to each other? Certainly, modern authors claim to reject or modify the notion of strict causality” (*Ibid.*). And he concludes: “But whether or not a single term like ‘contingency’ can capture the principle of organization of any narrative whatsoever, theory must recognize our powerful tendency to connect the most divergent events (...). Not even fortuitous circumstance – the random juxtaposition of pages – will deter us” (*Ibid.*). Contingency understood, in short, not as the abolition of nexuses, but as the engine of the liberation of nexuses, which are thus no longer tied in the stiffness of causality, chronological ordering, linearity, etc.

On the other hand, reconciling the narrative with aesthetic authenticity can also involve shifting the focus from the fable to the domain of narration. In this last sense, it is not a question of adapting the work of narration to the contingency of an autonomous realistic world (where the fable unfolds), but of reaffirming the narration itself. In the narrative context, the plot is always different from the real, it is always *mimesis* or *diegesis*, despite more or less realistic methods. No matter how autonomous the fable presents itself (as in classical cinema), this autonomy is always precarious because it depends on the concealment of the narration, and this concealment can never be absolute in the narrative context. The concealment of the narration is a deception that, even if it is tacitly accepted between the creator and the audience, ends up reinforcing the thesis of an incompatibility between narrative and aesthetic authenticity. So that there is no deception, the naive assumption of an autonomy of the fable must be abolished; and the contingency must then transcend the world of the fable and mix with the narration itself: for example, by breaking the fourth wall, by taking over the backstage (like the microphone that enters the frame in *cinéma-vérité*), by nourishing the author’s style, by highlighting the honesty of confessions and metadiscourses, etc. More than an erasure of the narrative, it is a matter of privileging the narration itself, caught in the contingency of a domain that no longer distinguishes between story and plot. To a large extent, it is in the context of this permeability that we should read

Godard's following maxim: "All great fiction films tend towards documentary, as all great documentaries tend towards fiction. (...) And whoever opts for one necessarily finds the other at the end of the path" (Godard, 1985, p. 144).

Be that as it may, these perspectives of narrative reintegration contrast with an extensive tradition of aesthetic thought that rejects narrativity, either due to its complicity with *logos* (criticism of the diegetic tradition of the arts), or due to its complicity with representation (criticism of the mimetic tradition of the arts). Indebted to the path outlined by Baumgarten in the 18th century, narrative criticism is often linked to an understanding of aesthetic authenticity based on an immanentist or materialist version of realism. In film theory, Deleuze was perhaps the most influential representative of this theoretical position: his concept of *time-image*, dedicated mainly to cinema after the Second World War, describes the terms of an approach whose priority is no longer the chain of actions or the organic relationship between the narrative events, but above all the fragmentation, the episodic, the autonomous situation. Communication and narratology theorists speak of an anti-narrative movement.

However, more than a concerted disregard for the narrative conventions of cinema, this artistic drive constituted, in practice, a mere alternative way of poetic exploration among others. It was not so much a question of rejecting narrative, but of treading new paths of narrative expression in cinema, equally accessible to film studies in general. Although the condition of unreality of narratives seems to compromise the possibility of an authenticity based on presence, it is undeniable that the film narrativity itself has also evolved towards an integration of contingency and authenticity. Narrative is not necessarily opposed to aesthetic authenticity.

Naturalism and verisimilitude in classical cinema

If it is true that artistic practice tends to betray the real due to the implied authorship and its performative nature, then the effect of aesthetic authenticity must essentially imply a dissimulation of authorial intention, so that the (performative) work can trigger an

interpretation shift, redirecting it to the real. In other words, it is about counteracting the artificialness implied in the poetic game through that same poetic game.

But we no longer find ourselves in the domain of mimetic realism and its naturalistic or illusionistic cosmetics. The challenge goes deeper. In Tarkovsky's words: "You can play a scene with documentary precision, dress the actors in a naturalistically accurate way, work every detail so as to give them a close resemblance to real life, and still make a film that nothing resembles reality and conveys the impression of profound artificiality, that is, of non-fidelity to life, even though artificiality was exactly what the author tried to avoid" (Tarkovsky, 1998, pp. 19-20). It is not enough to simulate "life", it is necessary to neutralize the authorial presence, so that life can speak for itself, i.e., so that the voice is no longer that of the author, but of life itself: "For a work to be 'completed', everything that reveals or suggests its manufacture must become invisible. The artist (...) must continue his efforts until his work has eliminated all traces of work" (*ibid.*, p. 113). This is also what Heidegger meant when he described the *being-work-of-the-work* beyond its "being-object" or its "being-device". In his words: "Through [the artist], the work must be freed for pure being-in-itself. Precisely in great art, and this is the only art in question here, the artist remains somewhat indifferent to the work, almost as an access to the emergence of the work, an access that cancels itself in creation" (Heidegger, 1992, p. 31). Ultimately, this is a kind of autophagy of art: aesthetic authenticity depends on the work's ability to prevent the author from revealing himself as a craftsman. In short, it is a matter of avoiding the unmasking of the authorial operation or intention, even when the author's signature is explicit. This is one of the great challenges that artists face and always have faced. A paradoxical challenge, no doubt, and hence the autophagy of art, which proposes to build its authenticity at the cost of revoking itself. This poetic effort is notorious in artist's small dissimulating decisions, but also in the great movements and trends, being transversal to different arts and periods.

The foundation of this aesthetic authenticity is related to the figure of *contingency*. Things are contingent insofar as they

exhibit an essential indifference. They are casual, aimless, even when they obey a causality or offer a prediction of the future. It is assumed, for example, that natural laws are contingent; and even moral laws can be taken as contingent in the eyes of the relativist, the nihilist or even the biologist. Contingent things are free and offer freedom to whoever interpret them, regardless of whether we are referring to their past (they are the result of a succession of accidents), their present (they are as such as they could be otherwise) or their future (they have no special purpose, preference or helmsman, even when they are enmeshed in a deterministic system and are resolutely heading towards a specific point – itself caught up in the contingency).

Contingency implies a deficit of meaning: it is commonly said that “the real has no meaning” because it is contingent, unlike fiction, where there will be a purpose for things and events. In the real there is something that is fundamentally missing and sustains this deficit of meaning: the absence of a subjective guidance, a helmsman, an author. Strictly speaking, there will still be meaning, but it will be built on literal sense, it will be mere information from an orphan world. As soon as the author is reintroduced and the mediating object regains its performative dimension, contingency recedes and gives room to artifice. It will then be necessary to protect the contingency so that art can still fulfill its purpose of authenticity. More than fidelity to any preconceived notion of the real, it is a matter of denying the artificialness implied by the artist’s own intrusion. It is the very dispute between contingency and artificialness.

The naivest mode of contingency is naturalism (the proper mimetic work) as well as naturalization (the use of stable grammars over time). This “zero degree of cinematographic writing” (Burch, 1973), although based on normativity and the rejection of chance, establishes the terms of a common sense that combines the realist potential of the device with a “natural” grammar, a kind of perceptive onomatopoeia of the cinematographic eye. In classical cinema – whose hegemony in production circuits was never lost – the contingency effect is essentially based on two principles: verisimilitude (the illusion of the real, the refinement of imitation

techniques) and the preservation of the fourth wall, which separates the inner space of the diegetic world from the space of reception, authorship and narration. With this separation, the world of the fable can remain autonomous – that is, apparently untouched or in a natural state, regardless of whether it is fictional or documental, inventive or historical – while the narration tends towards omniscience and invisibility. Such is the principle of “transparency” in classical cinema. It is, however, a false exemption, and hence the naivety and theatricality of this type of cinema, which seeks to simulate the contingency of the real through its technical and dramatic reconstruction, against the very notion of contingency.

It is true that this transparency is not watertight. Cinema assimilated new techniques and styles inherited from the successive avant-gardes, in addition to being influenced by other arts and by developments in the audiovisual medium itself, such as the impact of television language from the 1950s onwards, or the effects of the increasing portability of analogue and digital video, which culminated in the current radicalization of accessibility and uses. All these developments helped to shape the cinematographic language throughout its history, allowing it to naturalize new styles and approaches. In fact, cinema classicism has become more diffuse and difficult to circumscribe nowadays: a typical Hollywood film can either remain faithful to the sober and impersonal approach, investing in maximum denotative clarity, or it can assume a more informal style, resorting, for example, to camera shake and the use of jumpcuts to accentuate the illusion of casualness typical of documentary testimony². Even so, it is in cinematic vanguard’s experimentalism, and not in naturalism or naturalization, that cinema’s commitment to aesthetic authenticity becomes most profound. This is where we should focus our analysis.

² For example, in *Saving Private Ryan* (1999), by Steven Spielberg, the initial sequence of the allied troops arrival in Normandy follows a visual style of “war report”, with chaotic camera movements and other cinematographic techniques – including the use of special lenses and color fading filters, lower shutter speed, etc. – to imitate what would have been an on-site filming during the historic event.

The principle of exemption in the cinema aesthetic regime

Post-war modern cinema introduced new levels of authorial exemption, seeking to circumvent the classical approach contradictions through a more direct use of contingency, without domestication or simulation. This principle of exemption affected the whole of cinema and its methodologies. It was not a documentary movement, but an evolution shared by all genres, from fiction to documentary. Sometimes a passive attitude (the refusal of poetic intervention, the artist's inaction), or else an active approach (the work of deconstructing clichés and passing through chaos, which Deleuze described as "disfiguration"). In any case, an impartial attitude towards the real, even when it is the artist who deliberately produces chaos or when the world of the fable is completely invented. Ultimately, in the cinema aesthetic regime, the very question of passivity and activity loses significance, giving way to an indiscernibility or "identity of opposites" (Rancière, 2014).

Paradoxically, the challenge of authorial exemption becomes more problematic in cinema due to its intrinsically realistic characteristics. Unlike other arts such as literature, where the link to reality is necessarily indirect, the cinematographic device offers a direct passage, what Bazin described as the very ontological realism of the photographic image. In the words of Rancière: "The machine eye naturally operates what literature should operate by artifice: the disappearance of the will towards art in its product (...). The truth of the movement machine is the equality of all movements" (Rancière, 2012, p. 46). In artistic purpose, this advantage is actually a disadvantage. If aesthetic authenticity calls for a *return to the real* rather than the real itself, then cinematographic art must counteract the innate immediacy of the cinematographic device. Rancière adds:

[Cinema's] continuity with the ongoing aesthetic revolution that made it possible is necessarily paradoxical. If one finds in its initial technical apparatus the identity of the passive with the active that constitutes the principle of this revolution, it can only be faithful to the extent that it adds a point to its secular dialectic. (...) Its artistic procedures must constitute dramaturgies

that contradict its natural powers (...) The cinematographic fable is a contradicted fable. (Rancière, 2014, pp. 24-25)

Art implies, by definition, an unavoidable complicity with the fictitious. By subscribing to performativity, even if only during the moment of reception, the work detaches itself from the real and introduces an additional dimension that comes to superimpose itself over the informative literality of the object or event, violating its immediacy. Thus, when Bazin praises the cinema without tricks or the neutral style of neorealist filmmakers, he doesn't just point out the intrinsic ambiguity of the projected real, but he describes concrete examples of poetic processes that contribute to disguising or neutralizing the author's intention. It is not so much a question of being faithful to the real (and its literal sense), but, above all, of disguising the artificialness of authorial intention or manipulation. It is in this game of disguises that authorial exemption makes sense as a method. In its drive towards contingency, modern cinema methodologically conspires against the classic cohesion in favor of the fortuitous and the accidental, as if the events had their own sufficiency, an autonomous order (or disorder), without planning.

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Ambiguity

Based on this comprehensive principle of authorial exemption, modern cinema has implemented a whole new range of *contingency figures* that we group here into three main types: the figures of *ambiguity*, *autonomy* and *sincerity*.

The concept of "ambiguity" was adopted by André Bazin to account for the very ontological character of the real, assimilable by cinema. Especially since Italian neorealism, this ambiguity has influenced the choice of methods and approaches, setting the tone for a new cinematographic sensibility. Ambiguity is not a polyvalence, nor a difference, nor a collision of contrasts. More than presenting a range of choices, ambiguity makes choices fuzzy. Instead of multiplying, crossing, or overlapping paths, it erases them, makes them undefined.

Generally speaking, figures of ambiguity work towards openness and decentering. There is, first of all, a principle of neutrality through

which the filmmaker avoids conditioning attention, either by refusing editing (which imposes new visual highlights in each cut), or by resorting to the long shot with depth of field (which allows to present the situation in its entirety without electing privileged elements). The visual frame itself loses its centralizing force as the framing borders become permeable, fostering a dialogue between the field (the interior of the cinematographic frame) and the out-of-field. Relevant events begin to take place outside the frame's visual range; the voice-over becomes more persistent; the reverse shot is given up (there are entire dialogues in which the interlocutor does not appear); the camera behavior is emancipated from the centers of action; characters circulate between the inside and outside of the frame without the camera following them. For example, in *Involuntary* (2008), by Ruben Östlund, the camera often assumes voyeuristic points of view with fixed framings where the characters appear partially cut or out of visual range: there are several shots with the heads left out of frame, a shot focused on the feet of the characters while they talk at a party, framings through half-open doors or windows, allowing to capture only part of the action that takes place on the other side, apparently uninterested shots in which someone remains hidden or momentarily enters and leaves the framing, etc. In such films, one gets the palpable impression that the diegetic world is unlimited, much larger than the limits of the frame, and that the cinematographic frame is only a sample, more than a center. At the same time, the framing also reflects an ontology of the non-place, of the passing space, always oblivious to what happens in it, essentially indifferent to the transits and events that cross it. This neutrality of the frame invites the freedom of the gaze and, eventually, leads to an existential effect of *presence* – the *hic et nunc*.

Parallel to this neutrality of the cinematographic gaze, the filmic contents also become more casual. *Casualty* is expressed in the choice of trivial, inconsequential events. Not only do the themes become more mundane, but the narrative directions also become ambiguous. There is a decentering of the dramatic axes, motivated by narrative digressions or by the inclusion of loose elements that confuse bearings and intentions. Casual events are no longer

organized within narrative arcs, occurring freely without showing a motivation or narrative function. Stories become unfinished, with plot holes and open endings. In general, a narrative drift is installed, apparently without a helmsman, without selectivity of events or without clues about their relevance.

This casualty of the filmic elements is reinforced by the author's *impartiality*. It is essentially a nihilistic stance: the author does not take sides, does not judge, is not biased, does not express an intention. All intentionality is transferred to the characters themselves (who embody heroism, perversion, beliefs, partialities), while the author remains exempt, even when the narration speaks in the first person. Tarkovsky says that "the greatness and ambiguity of art consist in the fact that it does not prove, does not explain and does not answer questions, even when it emits warning signals like 'Beware! Radiation! Danger!'" (Tarkovsky, 1998, p. 60). This impartiality neutralizes the propagandistic function of cinema, but also places it above any censorship. Cinema becomes free, not because it asserts its freedom (which would still be advertising), but in the sense that it assumes an almost naive indifference or amorality: for example, the lack of pudency in a nudity shot that shows without intending to show, or which doesn't show without intending to hide.

The figures of *neutrality*, *casualty* and *impartiality* all share the same ambiguous character that Bazin applauded in neorealist films, against classical illusionism. In all these figures, the ambiguity results from a decentering of the authorial intention: the focus disperses, and the filmic landscape becomes disinterested, adirectional, apparently orphaned.

Autonomization

A different way of accessing contingency can be described through the notion of *autonomy*. Autonomy resembles ambiguity, but its figures are dedicated to the deconstruction of structures and connections, more than to impassivity. Although autonomization and ambiguation intersect and converge in their effects, the respective figures sometimes point in opposite directions. While ambiguity

promotes a decentering of focus, autonomy tends to focus on isolated parts. The watchword here is fragmentation. There is, first, a tendency to disregard the narrative principle of organic chaining of actions and events. Instead of action, which follows a previous state and prepares the next, the autonomous, independent situation takes the fore. The situational event detaches from the narrative or compositional totality, installing itself in-between, that is, in situations that do not contribute to the evolution of the plot, although they enrich the diegetic world. In Terrence Malick's work, this replacement of action for situation is manifest: in *A Hidden Life* (2019), a film about the story of an Austrian farmer who refuses to fight for the Nazis during World War II, the filmmaker rarely focuses on the narrative turning points (plot points), preferring to get lost in the small moments of everyday life, in the impasses, in the tasks of the rural world, in the silent complicities. For example, when the protagonist is called by the regime's forces for basic military training, that moment is not shown: the narrative jumps directly from the rural world to the military world, ignoring the events that led from one state to the other, contrary to what would be expected in a conventional narrative. In Malick's contemplative style, the narrative steps (or beats) are continually silenced and replaced by atmospheric states, by pure situations, so that the viewer does not get the impression that he is being led by the narrative.

The same autonomization effect may appear through the stretching of situations, through duration itself. In *No Home Movie* (2015), by Chantal Akerman, the opening shot presents a windy and desolate scene, with a desert background and a tree in the foreground. The framing is fixed (albeit a bit rough) and without any evolution of the action. There is only the partially bare tree being buffeted by the wind. Perhaps a metaphor for the harsh passage of time. But what is to be highlighted here is the autonomizing effect that the stretched duration infuses in the shot: little by little, we give up any expectation of narrative continuity or connection between the visual parts of the shot itself and focus only on the sensoriality of the situation: the foliage of the tree takes on a life of its own, becomes expressive, and the shot tends to become self-sufficient, almost hypnotic.

Another mode of autonomization consists of temporal or spatial disorganization, either through the non-linear arrangement of narrative events or through the fragmentation of visual elements within sequences that refuse to reveal the global situation. A classic example of spatial fragmentation is Robert Bresson's *Pickpocket* (1959), in which the "scalpel-camera" dissects the action and produces an increasing abstraction of events due to the partial perspectives. Temporal nonlinearity also serves a similar effect of narrative fragmentation: in Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994), the nonlinear arrangement of events frees the narrative from any centralizing dramatic axis; and in *Memento* (2000), by Christopher Nolan, the inverted linearity of the plot expresses the very fragmentation of memory.

Fragmentation can also be obtained through visual interruptions, such as the use of formal separators that isolate sequences or shots. In *No Man's Land* (2012), by Salomé Lamas, a homeless man recounts episodes from his past as a mercenary and hired killer. The documentary is minimal, taking place almost entirely on an empty set, with the man sitting facing the camera in the center of the fixed frame. Whenever there is a cut in the interview, a black separator is inserted with the number of the following fragment. This separator, which constitutes an alternative solution to recurrent methods such as the use of jumpcuts or cutaway shots, gives the film a greater plasticity and stylization, but also contributes to accentuate the intrinsic weight of each shot by capitulating and isolating it from the rest. In *Love* (2015), by Gaspar Noé, all cuts of the film include a black separator. There is always a visual interruption, regardless of the type of spatiotemporal connection between contiguous shots. In these two examples, the visual fragmentation ends up reinforcing the autonomy and compositional integrity of the individual shots.

Another more transversal way of autonomy is *decontextualization*. Through the rarefaction of context, which is also common to the figures of ambiguity, the narrative is expropriated of its anchors. Stories of this type always seem to take place in between, without introductions or explanations, even when they respect a chronological order. Events and characters follow one another without a narrative pattern and the context gradually appears in the

uncompromising corollary of each new independent situation, so that the learning of the diegetic habitus reproduces the learning of the real, without a guide. In the opening minutes of *Hunger* (2008), by Steve McQueen, we follow the routine of a prison guard, a character who will not be particularly relevant to the plot, serving here as an introductory vehicle for the presentation of the prison where most of the action will take place. It is a casual character, out of context. This approach persists as we struggled to reach a broader context, like a hodgepodge of single pieces, each piece with its own autonomy. The protagonist appears relatively late, already caught up in this narrative tone: another casual piece. The typical mosaic of explanation of the historical event that serves as the subject of the film is never really formed, namely: the life of a group of IRA inmates in Maze prison, in 1981, when they prepare for a hunger strike. They are contingent characters in a contingent world, fragments without ostentation or special contextualization.

The autonomy effect does not only refer to the interior of narratives and filmic compositions, but it also applies to the relationship of individual works with other works and with the corresponding cultural and historical context. In this broader scope, the autonomy of the work – and the contingency effect associated with it – refers to the singularity of aesthetic experience. It is a defense of the sensible against the universality of the intelligible. Quoting Susan Sontag:

When we employ the notion of style historically, to group works of art into schools and periods, we tend to efface the individuality of styles. But this is not our experience when we encounter a work of art from an aesthetic (...) point of view (...). Then, so far as the work is successful and still has the power to communicate with us, we experience only the individuality and contingency of the style. It is the same with our lives. If we see them from the outside, as the influence and popular dissemination of the social sciences and psychiatry has persuaded more and more people to do, we view ourselves as instances of generalities, and in doing so, we become profoundly and painfully alienated from our own experience and our humanity. (Sontag, 2009, pp. 28-29)

This singularity, after all, is yet another form of autonomization by suspending ties with a normalizing authority. The focus turns not only to the subversive styles of auteur cinema, but above all to the possibility of an inner realism, through which one can access a more volatile domain of contingency, supported by the uniqueness of autonomous voices. It is not so much a question of valuing here the subversiveness of singular cinematographic works, but instead recognizing the intimate potential of the singular experience, against the generalizing effect of norms or the law.

Sincerity

In addition to the figures of ambiguity and autonomy, we also recognize a third way of accessing contingency: *sincerity*³. It is said that cinema is sincere as it manages to hide the filmmaker's manipulative work, even when the authorial mark is very present. It is not a question of refusing the poetic effort and defending a radical passivity, but only of guiding the work in such a way that the result does not feel fake. All artists seek to refine this dissimulating intuition, which is transversal to the various arts. It is true that artistic work is always an artifice, but that does not necessarily make it false. How do you lie without lying? Through performativity. And, from the anchor of performativity, also in art. Aesthetic sincerity is not epistemological (at least not in the conventional sense), it results from a poetic game that aims to adapt the execution to the proposal and the proposal to the execution, without incurring in exaggeration (as the forced adjectives

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³ The concept of *sincerity*, as adopted by pragmatic intentionalism along the lines of H. P. Grice, is added to the concepts of *veracity* (true or false) and *normativity* (right or wrong), contributing to a comprehensive categorization of the semantic modes of language (Habermas, 2004). In the present context, we appropriate the concept in a phenomenological sense that is demarcated from the properly pragmatic studies of communication, although both approaches (phenomenological and pragmatic) preserve common traits. The pragmatic approach addresses sincerity as a discourse validation modality that assumes the intention as a reference, while the phenomenological approach assumes the concept in terms of the relationship – recognized in the act of reading – between the form of the discourse and the projection of an authorial intention. In both cases, the attribute of sincerity depends on some kind of agreement between discourse and discursive intention.

in a poem) or in insufficiency (as the naïve amateurism in a realistic drawing). Sincerity knows neither impositions (exaggerations) nor attempts (insufficiencies). In sincerity there is no instruction. For the work to be freed from its manipulative tone, the instructions, attempts and goals must somehow remain hidden.

We can recognize the sincerity in the sober and unpretentious styles where the author tries to go unnoticed; or in the irreverence or insubordination of an original voice; or in the confessional and autobiographical gesture; or even in the self-consciousness of metadiscursive approaches. There is, in first place, a sincerity oriented towards objectivity, either due to the transparency by which it exposes the narrative contents, or due to the coherence or simplicity of the narration itself. In such works, we approach a natural legitimacy of the filmic elements, narrated by silent, reliable or literal voices. Many of the great classics are as such. Although this sobriety may bring us closer to the real, capturing its rawness and sensoriality, it should not be confused with sensationalism or sentimentality; on the contrary, any guidance or manipulation of emotions will be carefully concealed so that manipulation does not become obvious. Audience reactions must emerge naturally, as if they were based solely on the spectator's enthusiasm, regardless of the film's purpose. Thus, the focus shifts away from the author (which remains neutral) to its discourse (which becomes autonomous, self-sustained). In cinema, composers comment that the soundtrack fails when it becomes perceptible; and editors speak of their craft as an "invisible art": the less they draw attention to themselves, the better they are doing their job⁴. This camouflage of the artistic work is shared by fiction, documentary or any other genre. It ranges from classical naturalism to avant-garde experimentalism, from Dziga Vertov's *Kino-Pravda* to the direct cinema of Robert Drew and Richard Leacock. The author's self-imposition distracts the viewer from immersiveness⁵, suspends the literality that was invested in

⁴ See Apple, Wendy (2004). *The Cutting Edge: The Magic of Movie Editing*. USA.

⁵ At this point, it should be noted that the problem of *immersiveness*, by itself, raises a whole other order of questions related to aesthetic experience, similarly to the questioning of artificialness. *Immersiveness* is related to the literalization of the performative content, while *artificialness* is related to the literalization of the authorial intention.

the performative world and redirects it to the literality of the artist's craft itself, that is, to craftsmanship or artifice. The *literalization of the authorial intention* corresponds to *artificialness*.

But there is also a poetic sincerity that does not try to hide, and even highlights, the authorial manifestation and even the processes inherent to production. There are cinematographic trends where filmic self-consciousness becomes more apparent, either because they explicitly assume a subjective voice, or because of their formal stripping, or due to the precariousness of their means of production. This is often the case with autobiographies, family-films (home-movies) and diaristic, confessional or commented cinema, where the filmmaker's intimacy is shown apparently without filters, and where the very imperfections of the execution become testimonial (from Jonas Mekas to Agnès Varda). It is also the case with much of the so-called statement-cinema or essay-cinema⁶, the guerrilla-cinema⁷, the autoethnographic cinema and other variants where the author shares his personal experience, living context and convictions, even if his presence doesn't necessarily become a thematic center. And it is also the case of archival and found-footage cinema, which combines plasticity with memory, experimentalism with historical evidence, appropriation with truth value, poetic freedom with the "archive effect" (Baron, 2014).

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In both cases, we consider that literalization compromises the aesthetic experience. It is convenient, by the way, not to confuse the concept of *aesthetic authenticity* (which is here related specifically to *contingency*, against *artificialness*) with *aesthetic experience*, which involves other pro-aesthetic attractors besides contingency, namely *difference* (against *immersiveness*), and *persistence* (against *arbitrariness*). About these complementary angles of approach to the aesthetics of cinema, see Martins, 2020, *Persistence and Arbitrariness: considerations about repetition and duration in cinema*; and Martins, 2023, *Imersividade e Diferença no Cinema e nas Artes* [Immersiveness and Difference in Cinema and the Arts].

⁶ See, for example, Jean Luc Godard's *La Chinoise* (1967).

⁷ See, for example, the shorts *#Ya* (Ygor Gama and Florencia Rovlich, 2015) and *Balada de um Batráquio* (Leonor Teles, 2016). Although films like these clearly contain a political or ideological charge, their aesthetic dimension – or their aestheticization of images and sounds – somehow gives the films an amoral or trans-moral tone.

There is also the properly metadiscursive cinema, that informal cinema where everything becomes pro-filmic, including the means of production, the film crews, the equipment and the actual act of performance, exploring aesthetic authenticity directly through the abolition of the fourth wall, from the *cinéma-vérité* introduced by Jean Rouch to the hybrid cinema that freely mixes fiction with documentary. An emblematic example of this hybrid approach is the film *Lightning over Water* (1980), by Wim Wenders and Nicholas Ray, a metafilmic experience that follows the final phase of Nicholas Ray's life (who suffered from cancer), where the joint creative process of the two filmmakers is shown through the combination of staged sequences, improvised scenes, backstage shots and archival materials.

A broader manifestation of the metadiscursive register – from the *French New Wave* to the Danish manifesto *Dogma 95* – consists of deconstructing the cinematographic grammar itself with the purpose of unmasking it or making its underlying matrix visible, so that, in this new visibility, the primordial sincerity of the cinematographic act is recovered. The case of *Dogma 95* is especially illustrative of the realist effort to return cinema to a purer state. Among the ten rules of its “vow of chastity”, there are the following requirements: refusal of scenography and accessories, use of real locations and direct sound, free camera, absence of photographic tricks, filters or special lighting, rejection of historical themes (the film must take place in the present), rejection of genre cinema and refusal of dramatic clichés (for example involving homicides and weapons or heroes and villains).

Artificialness: the literalization of authorial intention

There are many poetic figures that convey the contingency effect. Whether through ambiguation, autonomization or sincerity, the artist will seek to address the real to the detriment of himself, even when his style remains unmistakable or when the thematic center is the autobiography. In this performative arc of return to the real, which is essential to aesthetic authenticity, it is not about betraying performativity and reducing experience to a literal sense. The real is literal insofar as it is not performative. In artistic

expression, on the contrary, the return to the real remains anchored on the level of performativity, from which the twist towards the real remains indirect. Despite the apparent paradox, it is precisely this management of distance, of deferral, of mediation, that bears the aesthetic authenticity, the experience of contingency in the work of art, the poetic feel of the genuine.

Despite its innate realist characteristics, cinema is not interested in the literal sense. On the contrary, its artistic value involves avoiding *literalization*, that is, avoiding the reduction of the work to its literal sense. In direct access to the real – for example in news reports, in empirical recordings, in naive documentarism – the performative dimension is missed and only information remains. This phenomenology is perfectly suited to various spheres of experience, but it does not fit in with aesthetic fruition. When the informative record imposes itself in the scope of art, the artistic act itself ends up being caught in the web of literality, not in the sense of a deeper dive into the real, but in the sense of an unmasking of the author, as in an act of magic which failed because the trick was spotted. This embezzlement of performance corresponds to a literalization of the authorial intention: the author is literalized as the work's strings become visible (against his will). The artist's effort is also part of the real – in the same sense that a photographic image is assumed to be a mechanical extension of the photographed reality – but this link to the real must remain indirect so as not to overlap with the work's performative dimension. When the operation draws too much attention to itself, it becomes an extension of the literality of the real and the work's performative relationship with the spectator is suspended. Contingency then gives way to *artificialness*. This is what we feel when the work seems forced, convenient, far-fetched, operatic, false.

For the work to preserve authenticity, the author must be simultaneously involved (performative condition of the work) and dissimulated (return to the real). How is this dissimulation possible in the context of art? By directing the focus to the effect and not to the execution, that is, by avoiding artificialness. The literalization of the authorial intention consists of that instant (of exaggeration or insufficiency) in which the execution eclipsed the effect. When

one says that a given poetic decision by the artist is forced or “feels fake”, one does not mean to attack the artifice itself, since any performative object implies, by definition, an escape from the real. The problem is not in the authorial or performative nature of the work, nor even in the awareness of composition or structure, but in the mismatch between the author’s intention and his creation, which also corresponds to a mismatch during fruition. The aesthetic experience requires the spectator to take responsibility, co-authorship⁸; and this involvement consists, first, in engaging with the proposal (performatively) without bumping into the underlying mechanisms of such proposal (informatively).

In the poetic orientation towards the real, *artificialness* – the literalization of the author, the unmasking of his intention – occurs due to insufficiencies and exaggerations, that is, the artist errs by default or by excess. Such fault impressions can coexist in the same object (perhaps this is the recipe for *kitsch*, for example), but, in general, it is possible to distinguish them clearly. In the first case, critics speak of amateurism, simplism, facilitation, predictability, etc. These and other insufficiencies go back to the ancient intuition that Plato already used in his criticism directed at art as *mimesis* (the problem of the insufficiency of the copy in relation to the original, of the mundane in relation to the ideal). In the second case, critics speak of convenience, partiality, pretentiousness, manichaeism, sensationalism, sentimentality, or other visible forms of orchestration of certain effects. Quoting Tarkovsky: “When what you have in sight is just the achievement of an effect or the applause of the audience, it is so easy to film a beautiful scene... However, one step in that direction and we are lost” (Tarkovsky, 1998, p. 93). And he adds: “Although, ultimately, all art is biased, [the] same bias can either be absorbed by the unfathomable layers of artistic images that shape it, or it can be exaggeratedly asserted (...). The trend must be hidden, so that it is not exposed like the springs that jump out of a sofa” (*Ibid.*, p. 56). This is also what happens when the work provides reading instructions, when it imposes an

⁸ See Martins, 2018.

intention, a focus of attention, a forced interpretation. The work reveals its artificialness as soon as the trends and instructions leap into view, in the same way that jokes lose their comic effect when they are explained. It is also for the same reason that art shouldn't show morality. Morality is a form of instruction. Still according to Tarkovsky: "The aesthetic structure does not need statements, and the strength of art does not lie there" (*Ibid.*, p. 57).

The poetic effort counteracts artificialness with its phenomenological opposite: *contingency*. In modern cinema, this movement was signaled, at first, in the renewed desire to rehabilitate and show chance itself. In Burch's description: "We are interested here in the fascination that the 'creator' can feel when contemplating and 'presenting' objects or materials which were not created by him, which seem to him more beautiful because they do not come from him (that is, from Men, from the Artist)" (Burch, 1973, p. 129). But the reconciliation of cinema with chance is not a pure dive into exemption, it is still a full-fledged effort, a *poiesis*, a voice, an aesthetic discourse. It will therefore be necessary to redirect the focus: "What interests us here is above all the satisfaction that one can have (and of which some are ashamed, still feeling it) in reworking such materials, such objects, skillfully combining them with others of his own making, finally in bringing them back to the status of a closed work, pulling them out of the contingency where they germinated... and continuing to preserve the originality of these materials coming from another world" (*Ibid.*).

In these terms, it is not so much about capturing the real, but mainly about the author's effort not to disturb the work with the traces of his own manipulative intervention. *Contingency* is to be understood here as a dissimulation of the authorial intention, against *artificialness*. Of course, *contingency figures* do not offer concrete art recipes, not even specific contents. It is not about proposing an artist's manual. However, the three varieties of figures that the phenomenological analysis allowed us to point out here – *ambiguity*, *autonomy* and *sincerity* – can, nevertheless, help us map the guidelines that feed, in each historical moment, the unceasing search for aesthetic authenticity.

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